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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between the family day care home provider and the mother, and the effect of this relationship on treatment of the child by the provider. Interactions between 25 family child care providers and mothers, and between providers and children, were observed. Observations of interactions between mothers and providers took place at the end of the day. Interactions between providers and children were observed during free play times in the day care setting. Findings showed no evidence of carryover from the mother-provider relationship to the provider's treatment of the child, and no differences in provider's affect, warmth, encouragement, frequency of conversations with the child, amount of teaching, or total amount of discipline toward the child. It is noted that self-selected family child care homes may have been generally higher in quality than those that were randomly chosen and that this phenomenon may have influenced mothers' attitudes. (SH)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MOTHER-PROVIDER RELATIONSHIP IN FAMILY CHILD CARE HOMES

by

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Children's lives are affected not only by their families and immediate neighborhoods but also by alternative child care situations. Those who provide child care become significant people to the parents as well as the children. Parents have a variety of perceptions about providers but always see them as someone they must count on.

Research has demonstrated the importance of supportive relationships of the significant adults in the lives of children such as parents and child care providers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kontos & Dunn, 1989). How they get along, respect each other, and the tone of their interactions may be important to the child. Some researchers have identified child care providers as members of "natural helping networks" (Unger and Powell, 1980; Powell 1978) to which parents informally turn in times of need rather than members of the formal helping professions.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that the interactions of the adults can affect the interactions between one of those adults and the child. In fact, he goes on to suggest that if the adult-adult relationship is effective then the adult-child relationship will be more positive. This means that the provider's treatment of a child could be affected by how well the provider and the parent get along. Child care providers like all teachers would like to think that they treat all children equally regardless of a child's parents or his or her background. On the other hand

many parents feel that they must do and say the "right"things to the provider so that their child will be well treated.

There seems to be supposition and myths surrounding this relationship. The parent wants the provider to like him or her and to continue to provide care for his or her child. When child care arrangements have broken down, a parent's whole world caves in. Providers want the parents to like them and continue to choose them as caregivers for the children. So there is a mutual interest in maintaining positive regard.

But what really goes on? Do providers treat children differently depending how well they like the parents? Several studies have provided some information about this complex situation. Hughes, (1985) looked at topics discussed by parents and providers at centers and family child care homes and how providers responded to parents (with helpful advice or just listening). He found that center providers spent less time with parents than day care home providers per week. However, rather than the child, the most frequently discussed topic by both provider groups was the parent's job.

In another study with three types of child care sites; kindergartens, centers, and a combination of sites, Smith and Hubbard (1988), found that warm and reciprocal parent-teacher relationships were associated with socially well adjusted children.

Kontos and Wells (1986) found similar trends in that mothers whose parenting abilities were respected by day care center staff

tended to have more personal relationships with them (discussing topics other than the child) than parents who were perceived as less competent. However, when they looked the child's day, they found no differences in how the children were treated, regardless of how competent the parents were perceived. Similar results were found by Fuqua and Fan (1987) who asked parents and providers about the type of conversations they had and how socially competent were the children.

Conversely, Kontos and Dunn,(1989) found that children whose parents were rated low on parenting abilities were rated significantly lower on language development as well as sociability than children whose parents were rated high on parenting ability. So It seems that the providers' perceptions of the parents affected how competent they perceived the children, but not how they treated them. Yet all the above-mentioned studies relied on interviews and questionnaires with very brief observation of either the children or the actual interactions between parents and providers. More studies are needed with direct observation of both the children and the parents interacting with the providers.

The present study attempted to answer the question: Does the relationship between the family day care home provider and the mother have any affect upon how the provider treats that mother's child? The study took place i a medium-sized Midwest city in which a major University is located. Twenty-five family child care providers were recruited by telephone from a list of

approximately 67 licensed homes who met the criteria of caring for 3 or 4 year old, white, middle-class children from intact homes. The average length of time as a child care provider was 9.6 years and over half had either attended some college (8) or had graduated (7). Fourteen of the 25 mothers had college or graduate degrees.

Interactions between mothers and family child care providers were observed at the end of the day when mothers came to pick up their children: interactions between providers and these mother's children were observed during free play times in the day care setting.

They also responded to questionnaires about their relationship with each other. The questions included ones about the frequency and length of phone calls and extended face-to-face conversations; and whether they would name each other as a friend. Many different types of child and provider behavior were observed.

The parent - provider pairs were characterized as being either more or less talkative with the more talkative pairs conversing longer and about topics other than the child. We found one provider behavior associated with talkativeness. Children of less talkative mother-provider pairs received a greater proportion of supportive discipline from providers. The focal child's affect was also associated with more talkative mother-provider pairs. Children of more talkative mother-provider pairs showed a significantly higher frequency of

positive affect with both providers and their peers. With so many measures of both provider and child behaviors which did not show any differences, these two that did may well be chance findings. we could find no other evidence of carryover from the mother-provider relationship to how the provider treated the child.

Given the results from other studies, it was surprising that so little carryover existed from the mother-provider relationship to the provider-child relationship. There were no differences in provider affect, warmth, encouragement, frequency of conversations with the child, amount of teaching or total amounts of discipline towards the child.

It should be reiterated that these family child care homes were self-selected and might be generally higher in quality than if randomly chosen. These providers did not treat children differently based on their relationship with the mothers. As a group the providers were more educated and had been in the field longer than the national average of family child care providers. So, it may be that the mothers were at ease with the quality of care their child received and did not feel compelled to discuss their child with the provider.

Results of this study suggest that parents might relax and not be concerned about their relationship with the providers and how their child is treated. However, these results must be analyzed in light of the other studies (Smith,& Hubbard, 1988; Kontos & Wells, 1986) which did find some differences. Yet, the

sample of the present study was self-selected and reflected generally high quality care whereas the other studies used random samples. These data suggest that if parents choose high quality day care for their child, they should not have to focus on the quality or friendliness of their relationship with the provider.

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